

This is the third issue of the Advice NI newsletter on the Welfare Reform Bill. It is compiled on a fortnightly basis to keep our members up to date with the progress of the Bill as it moves through the Assembly. Any comments or suggestions for content can be emailed to Jenny McCurry - jmccurry02@qub.ac.uk

Assembly Activity

Thursday 29th of November

Assembly Press Release: Housing Concerns top the agenda as Committee meets Lord Freud

The Committee for Social Development met Lord Freud, the DWP Minister for Welfare Reform, to discuss a number of issues relating to the Welfare Reform Bill. In addition to matters such as securing flexibilities in the payment of Universal Credit and establishing a statutory right to independent advice within the Bill, serious concerns about changes to housing entitlements were raised. In particular, it was highlighted that applying the under-occupancy penalty or 'bedroom tax' to Northern Ireland would affect 26,000 Housing Executive tenants.

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/News-and-Media/Press-Releases/Housing-Concerns-top-the-agenda-as-Committee-meets-Lord-Freud/>

Tuesday 27th of November

APG on Mental Health discusses Welfare Reform

The APG met with representatives from Advice NI and the Royal College of Psychiatrists to discuss the implications of the Bill for people with mental illness. A speaker with personal experience of

the benefits system, budgeting and money issues affecting people with mental illness also shared her story. The meeting was very successful in highlighting the potential consequences of elements of the Bill and minutes will be available shortly. Secretarial support for the APG on Mental Health is provided by Mindwise.

Wednesday 21st of November

Contract awarded to carry out Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments

The contract to carry out PIP assessments in NI was awarded to Capita Business Services Ltd. PIP will replace the benefit for people aged 16-64 currently known as Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and involve an assessment of a claimant's needs which will be carried out by a 'trained, independent health professional'.

<http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dsd/news-dsd-211112-contract-awarded-for.htm>

Tuesday 20th of November

Assembly Votes to Establish Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements

Following the vote by the DSD Committee on the 8th of November, the Assembly has voted in favour of

establishing an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements to scrutinise the Welfare Reform Bill. The original motion to be voted on was that the Ad Hoc Committee 'shall consider and report only whether the provisions of the Bill are in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights'.

An amendment was subsequently tabled which proposed that, in addition to the above mentioned role, the Ad Hoc Committee would also take over the role of the Social Development Committee in scrutinising the Bill. On Monday 19th of November, a petition of concern was brought forward. This made the Assembly's vote subject to cross-community support and meant that the amendment which had been tabled no longer applied. The Assembly voted on the motion as it was originally proposed and decided in favour.

Official Report Available at:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/>

The Ad Hoc Committee has now been established and its membership has been announced. Its first meeting was on the 27th of November when it received a briefing from DSD officials. It will issue its report before the 22nd of January 2013. The Committee for Social Development's scrutiny of the Bill has been suspended until further notice. When the Ad Hoc Committee has finished making its recommendations they will be incorporated into the final report to be issued by the Committee for Social Development.

The Ad Hoc Committee's homepage is at:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Ad-Hoc-Committee-on-Conformity-with-Equality-Requirements-Welfare-Reform-Bill/>

The Ad Hoc Committee is now accepting submissions of evidence until the 11th of December:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Calls-for-Evidence/>

This week, the Committee will receive briefings from the Equality Commission and the NI Human Rights Commission on Monday 4th of December. It will receive a briefing from the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) on Tuesday 5th of December.

**Friday 30th of November
Advice NI AGM: *Welfare Reform, Getting it Right for Northern Ireland***

The focus of this year's AGM was welfare reform. The opening address was given by Social Development Minister Nelson McCausland. After dealing with AGM business and presenting Advice NI's annual report, the welfare reform theme continued with presentations from four panellists and a debate.

Mr McCausland mentioned the possibility of a delay in the migration process from PIP to DLA given the specific circumstances in Northern Ireland which distinguish it from the rest of the UK. Advice NI's Chief Executive, Bob Stronge, highlighted this as one to watch. A tweet from @niexecutive during the AGM confirmed that the Minister had 'asked officials to consider the case for delay in the reassessment of DLA customers until economic conditions improve'.

Alex Maskey MLA (Chair of the Social Development Committee) said that a statutory right to free, independent advice had unanimous support from within the Committee and they would welcome more detail on how it would work in practice. Mr Stronge explained that the delivery model could easily be developed where SSA contact anyone

negatively affected by welfare reform and encourage them to seek independent advice. Mr Maskey also expressed the need for clarity on the constraints of parity with regard to how implementation, conditionality and sanctions of Universal Credit could be adapted to the Northern Ireland context.

Avila Kilmurray (Director of the Community Foundation NI) spoke about the need to challenge perceptions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' benefits claimants which permeates political discourse and the media. Such portrayals have a negative impact on community relations by objectifying certain groups (such as NEETs) and shifting the blame for lack of employment onto new immigrant communities. There is a need to have an informed debate about these issues based on facts and evidence. Fear about changes to the welfare system, particularly among vulnerable groups such as the elderly, is adding to a sense of community destabilisation and fragmentation.

Elaine Burns (Manager of Ardoyne Association Advice Centre) outlined the major obstacles faced by advice services in North Belfast: welfare reform and government cuts. North Belfast Advice Partnership dealt with 961 appeals last year and with the reforms this is anticipated to quadruple. Changes already introduced (such as the shared room rate for under 35s) leave 4000 single people in danger of homelessness. Such changes have an impact on the mental health of clients and add stress to the workload of advice services which are already stretched to breaking point.

Carrie Montgomery (Assistant Director of Lifeline) outlined the services provided by Lifeline in the area of crisis counselling and suicide prevention. She stressed the need to take a positive approach to the issue and inform people about the services which are available. More information can be found by visiting: <http://www.lifelinehelpline.info/>

AGM attendees raised concerns about the lack of Northern Ireland specific evidence on which the proposed reforms are based. In the implementation of new policies it is common practice to use pilot schemes. Attendees expressed that the decision not to do this for welfare reform in Northern Ireland is extremely worrying.

We need your help!

Advice NI is seeking the inclusion of an additional clause in the Welfare Reform Bill stating:

“The Department of Social Development shall secure that independent advice about welfare reform, in particular to those negatively affected by welfare reform, is available free of charge to any person in Northern Ireland.”

We also wish to see:

- The inclusion of a clause to ensure effective scrutiny and monitoring of the service provider (Capita Business Services Ltd) which has been awarded the contract to assess claimants of Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
- The inclusion of a clause to ensure effective monitoring of the impact of the implementation of welfare reform, both directly on people and indirectly on displaced expenditure.
- Amendment to the child maintenance clause: When a family-based agreement cannot be reached, the penalty should be applied to the parent responsible for blocking agreement.

To support us please leave a comment on our page: <https://www.facebook.com/AdviceNI> and contact your local MLA to tell them you support Advice NI's position.

Recent Reports

Thursday 22nd of November

Westminster Work and Pensions Committee publish report - *Universal Credit: Meeting the Needs of Vulnerable Claimants*

Committee expresses support for the principles behind Universal Credit but raises concerns about the strength of plans which are currently in place to support more vulnerable claimants.

Key points:

Inadequately resourced advice services to cope with increased demand

The report recommended that the DWP should work closely with the advice sector to 'quantify and provide the extra resources necessary to fund retraining of advisers and the additional advice services which will be required to ensure a successful implementation of Universal Credit'. DWP has not yet specified how the advice sector will be supported to cope with the changes.

Witnesses (including Manchester City Council, Citizens Advice and Shelter) said that demand for advice is increasing in GB while cuts to local authority budgets and the removal of legal aid are leaving advice services under-resourced.

Lack of clarity on how vulnerable claimants will be supported to use the online system

The 'digital by default' approach to claiming via the online system 'carries a risk that some vulnerable people will have difficulty in accessing their benefit entitlement because they do not know how to make a claim'. The Committee calls on DWP to set out: how people will know where to go to make a claim; what support they will be able to get; and

what resources DWP plans to allocate to providing this support.

Single monthly payments to each household

These may be manageable for the majority of claimants but some vulnerable households may find them difficult to cope with. An 'exceptions' process for such claimants has been proposed, but there is a risk that vulnerable claimants will only be identified as such after they have experienced problems.

Impact on Disabled people

The Government has stated that Universal Credit will provide more support for disabled adults and children than for people in similar circumstances who are not disabled. However, concerns have been raised that the loss of additional disability payments available under the current system will make some disabled people worse off. The Committee urges the government to 'reconsider the system of disability additions under Universal Credit, particularly those affecting disabled children and severely disabled people, to ensure that it meets the commitment it has made to disabled claimants and that there is no diminution in their overall benefit package, which includes entitlement under Universal Credit.'

Read the summary and access the full report at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news/uc-substantive/>

DWP publishes the Work Capability Assessment independent review – year 3

The Work Capability Assessment (WCA) determines eligibility to claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Although progress has been made from previous year's reports, the report highlights a need to improve communications with claimants and within DWP operations. It also expressed a need to improve the face-to-face assessment and 'monitor Atos performance more closely'.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/employment-and-support/wca-independent-review/>

See also: Work capability assessment reform too slow, says independent review

Government acknowledges process of undergoing assessments is "more challenging than it should be".

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/nov/20/work-capability-assessment-reform-slow>

Media Coverage

Friday 30th of November

More Northern Ireland people seeking help

Advice NI said it has received 270,000 requests for help in the last year. Advice NI's Chief Executive Bob Stronge said that 43% of those seeking debt advice had mental health issues and almost half were home-owners. He said there was a lack of awareness among the most vulnerable groups about the impact of changes to the welfare system. In light of this, he highlighted Advice NI's call for the Northern Ireland Executive to include a statutory right to free independent advice in the Welfare Reform Bill.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20547142>

Monday 26th of November

Beveridge Report: From 'deserving poor' to scroungers?

BBC Magazine discusses the portrayal of benefits claimants by policy-makers and the media. It references recent statistics compiled by the British Social Attitudes Survey regarding public perception of the welfare system. BBC Radio 4 is producing a three-hour special report entitled 'The State of Welfare' which will be broadcast at 10am on Tuesday 27th of November. It will be available to listen again on BBC iplayer.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20431729>

Sunday 25th of November

Worries about accessing new Universal Credit online

The Highland Council's welfare reform working group has raised concerns about the impact of the new online claiming system for Universal Credit on people living in areas with poor internet connections.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-20461424>

Saturday 24th of November

Welfare reform and not paying the rent

The BBC comments on plans for tenants to make their own rent payments to landlords under Universal Credit, changing the current system of payments being made directly to landlords. The results of pilot projects being implemented in parts of England and Wales have been shrouded in secrecy to date, but interim reports suggest that approximately 20-30% of tenants will struggle to pay their rent on time when Universal Credit is

introduced. Last month Nelson McCausland announced that Northern Ireland had secured an opt-out to these changes which are still planned to go ahead in GB.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20459252>

Wednesday 21st of November

Benefit Reforms Could Increase Homelessness, Warns Housing Group

Community Housing Cymru (CHC) in Wales has warned that homelessness could increase and more people may turn to using loan sharks if the current plans to revamp the welfare system go ahead. The organization says that any savings made by the introduction of the changes will be outweighed by the cost of people losing their homes.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-20420123>

Scots charities 'struggle to meet demand' as welfare cuts bite

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) has released figures from research it has conducted into the estimated impact of welfare reform on voluntary sector organisations. 76% of the charities surveyed said that they expected demand for their services to 'increase significantly' over the next year, and 81% said that they expected the financial situation of the sector as a whole to get worse over the next 12 months. The Scottish government said that the reforms introduced by Westminster are coming too fast and third sector organisations are the ones 'picking up the pieces'.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-20417508>

Tuesday 20th of November

'Bedroom tax' dilemma for social housing tenants

People living in social housing who have a spare bedroom will have their housing benefit claim reduced under welfare reforms. Housing officers in

the North of England, an area expected to be heavily affected by the changes, say that many clients they deal with are unaware of the changes because they cannot read or write. There is a severe shortage of one bedroom properties in the area. Endeavour Housing Association in Stockton has 153 families who are under-occupying two-bedroom homes but no one-bedroom properties are available for them to move into.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20403923>

Friday 16th of November

Welfare reform hits private renters hardest, report finds

Report by Pro-Housing Alliance highlights the adverse impact of benefit caps on 1.4 million private renters. Privately rented properties are often in poor condition and rents are rising. A report by the National Audit Office found that 90% of private renters surveyed knew "not very much or nothing at all" about the changes soon to be implemented in housing payments.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2012/nov/16/welfare-reform-private-rented-sector>

Wednesday 14th of November

Arms Giant and Credit Firm sign up to no 10 online identity scheme

The Government has announced its first 7 partners selected by DWP to take part in the national assurance identity scheme which will allow access to the new online system for claiming Universal Credit. Claimants will be asked to verify their identities by giving their password to one of a list of private organisations.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/arms-giant-and-credit-firm-sign-up-to-no-10-online-identity-scheme-8315960.html>